

Hair by kittenCorrosion

Series: the name of the game (stranger teens 2.0) [3]

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Angst, Bullying, Emotional Hurt/Comfort, F/M, Fluff, Hair Braiding, Hair Playing, Mileven, fuck this is so cute and then angsty, he loves her holy crap, i put angst in everything sorry, it's cute in the end tho i promise, oh my god the fluff, pretty/still pretty

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Relationships: Eleven & Mike Wheeler, Eleven/Mike Wheeler

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Summary:

It's not something she ever needed to be pretty to him. She's always pretty to him. But somehow the two words are tied together until a devastating action helps him to teach her the truth.

She's always pretty to him.

Hair

Author's Note:

sorry to take so long to post something new i've been so busy. i still am honestly, i'm in a wedding on sunday and two of my professors gave take home tests over thanksgiving break because fuck college students.

really quick: holy shit thank you all so much. i seriously went from having 23 subscribers to 87 in like three weeks and honestly, i'm still shitting my pants a little bit. the comments have had me sobbing and i'm still too exhausted to reply but i'm going to try cause i love ya'll.

this was inspired by elevensblankerfort on instagram who mentioned wanting a fic where mike braids el's hair and this whole idea came to me and i wrote it like four hours ago. still working on the other stories but i can't promise anything. now that i'm on break i'll try and finish a few more.

Mike had never really thought about hair before. It was the stuff that grew out of his head and got too long and fell into his eyes in ebony waves that he had to constantly push out of his face. The stuff his mom tugged at and messed with, like she could tame it, before giving in and taking him to get it cut.

It just... existed on his head.

But for the first time in his life he was starting to notice it. Not his hair, he still didn't give two shits about that—but *her* hair. El's hair.

When he'd met her it had been the most noticeable thing about her. Or the lack of it, really. The short cap of brunette fuzz that made it easy to mistake her for a boy. That's what hair was usually associated with, feminine softness, bouncing waves of blonde curls or silky chestnut strands that the women on TV stroked during commercials.

She hadn't had that, her appearance edged with bloody noses and a stare that could stop you in your tracks. He hadn't thought about her like that at first, anyways. She was just another kid, lost and cold in the rain, who needed his help. It hadn't been a choice, handing over his jacket, giving her clothes and a place to sleep. She had *needed* those things, had needed him to provide that for her and he always helped when he was needed. In a way... he needed to be needed.

That blonde wig had done it. After amazing him with her abilities and her willingness to help them find his friend despite the danger had softened him. That damn wig had bowled him over.

"Pretty," he'd mumbled, almost more to himself than her.

And that had been the truth. Up until then he'd thought the occasional girl at school was pretty. He'd had crushes, none of which mattered since he was one of the dorky nerds that got picked on and spent too much time with the science teacher. Which was fine, he couldn't talk to girls anyways.

But he could talk to her. Easily. She'd been so selfless and understanding and for the first time he'd been able to look at a girl and call her pretty and not want to run away at the same time. And instead of sneering and calling him weird or a nerd... she had smiled.

The wig didn't matter in the end. It had been her, who she was, that had captured his heart in the weirdest sort of way. Which was why it had hurt so much when she'd disappeared. Sometimes he'd spot someone with a shaved head and his heart would speed up for just a moment, just a second, until he realized it wasn't her and the hurt crashed over him again. That was how he'd remembered her, the picture he kept in his mind, of her with her buzzed hair and giant hazel-brown eyes, and soft smile that made him feel invincible.

It was one of the things that had surprised him when she walked into Will's house, eyes darkened, looking like one of the kids at school who smoked under the bleachers at age thirteen.

And her hair had been slicked back, a ruffle of curls at the nape of her neck, her hairline similar to the first time he'd seen her standing in the forest, blinking rain out of her eyes. That moment would be

one he'd always remember, the disbelief and pain followed by a sunburst of joy. Because he had been right and she was still alive and then he was holding her, feeling just how real she was in his arms.

He could never forget that moment.

The Snow Ball had been the first time he'd seen her hair tamed into something... usual. The curl in the middle of her forehead, the plastic barrette that pulled it back from her face, the curls looser as they bunched around her head.

"You look beautiful," he had told her, voice honest, lips smiling like she was the greatest thing he'd ever seen in his life.

He hadn't been afraid of being weird, or that she wouldn't believe him, the small smile and the shy ducking of her head letting him know she heard every word. And they had danced and he'd kissed her in the middle of the gym, not caring who saw because it didn't matter. What mattered was that she was there and he had kept his promise. Her hair had tickled his face as she pressed her forehead against him, smelling like some sort of flowery shampoo and the woodsmoke from the cabin she stayed in.

It had been perfect.

Now, a year and a half later, she was laying on her back in front of him, her head on his thigh as they hung out on blanket in his backyard, warm May sunshine filtering down through the tree. It lit up the brown locks that tangled around her face, shining on the soft blondish-red highlights that ran naturally through the strands. It was longer, the curls growing into softer waves that fell around her shoulders and bounced when she laughed.

"—shouldn't use it to trip people," she sighed, shifting against him.

He was sitting cross-legged, her head halfway in his lap as they talked about school. The popular girls still had it out for her after she'd snubbed them at the beginning of the year to be hang out with Mike and the party. She was never one to back down from a fight and this was no different. He understood why the Chief worried about her so much.

“I mean, he’s right, El. You can’t risk being found out or you might have to hide again,” he gave her a serious look. “And I don’t think I could handle you being locked away for another year.”

“I’m careful,” she insisted stubbornly. “You worry too much.”

“I just... I told you, I can’t lose you again. Not ever.”

“You won’t.”

Her eyes softened and she reached up for his hand, which was resting next to her head in his lap, squeezing it in her own. She let go and sighed, not ready to give up the argument.

“Troy doesn’t bother you anymore. Because of me,” she tried to reason. “If they’re afraid of me too, they’ll leave me alone.”

“But Troy *knows* you could kick his ass. You already broke his arm. Those girls just think they’re clumsy or something when you trip them... they don’t know it’s you or that they should be afraid of you.”

“They’re mean. It’s stupid.”

He sighed. “That’s what bullies do. They don’t have reasons to be terrible, they just are.”

She shifted, rolling onto her side so her hair fell into her face, obscuring her face from his view. There was an annoyed huff from under the mass of brown waves and he grinned as she pouted, knowing he was right but not wanting to admit it. She was problem solver like he was, always wanting to find a solution since she had an advantage of being able to move stuff with her mind.

It was super cute.

He couldn't resist, reaching and pushing the soft strands out of her face, twisting them around his fingers as he combed them out of her face. It was a weakness he didn't like to admit, how much he loved to play with her hair.

When he was little Nancy had been given some long-haired Barbie for Christmas and he'd secretly stolen and played with it, incessantly running the small plastic hairbrush through the synthetic hair. Nancy had of course found him and snatched the doll back, teasing him for playing with a girl toy and making him run away crying. He'd only been six, but he'd never forgotten.

But now he was allowed to play with his girlfriend's hair, smiling as she sighed and shifted closer, enjoying the feeling. It was always kind of nice to have your hair played with, he would admit to that, and knowing she liked it made him happy.

She was quiet, eyes closing as he ran his fingers through her brunette waves, gently gathering them and pulling them towards him. His fingers were always careful, tenderly tucking the messy strands behind her ear when they kissed. Looking down he furrowed his brow, remembering what he'd seen his mom do to Nancy's hair for years and what she now did to Holly's, separating the bunch of hair into three smaller sections.

If anyone ever asked him if he knew how to braid hair he would *immediately* say no, but right now it was just the two of them, sprawled under the blue sky in his backyard, and he didn't care, knowing she would never judge him. She was allowed to know that sort of thing, the intimate secrets no one else knew.

His fingers moved deftly, it wasn't the first time he'd tried this, and soon there was a long braid curling over his leg like a satin rope. It was better than the first one he'd tried, while they'd watched a movie in his living room. Or the second one, when she'd fallen asleep during a visit to the cabin. His skills were better and he tucked a loose strand behind her ear as he admired his handiwork.

"Feels nice," she sighed, before blinking open her eyes and smiling up at him.

“Your hair is nice,” he could feel his face heating up. “I just like to touch it, sorry.”

“No sorry. I like it.”

He let the braid go and it quickly fell apart without a tie to hold the sections together, falling back around her head. Sitting up slowly, she turned around and smiled again, the kind that made her eyes hazy, leaning forward to give him a lazy kiss, her hair falling into his face as he leaned into her lips, the content happiness breezing around them like a breath of wind. She pulled back, looking at him through the brown curtain.

“I like *you*,” she whispered, eyes full of light.

Two weeks later—three days before school got out for the summer—he stared into the same eyes, red-rimmed and full of tears.

The girls, the same ones who had been so nice to her on her first day, had cornered her during a free period in the library, out of sight of any responsible adult. El knew better than to use her gift, too afraid of being discovered when there were so many eyes, unable to fight back.

“Since you think you’re too good to hang out with us,” Stacey had snapped her gum, “we’ll just have to make you match your ugly friends.”

There had been six of them and one of her and she’d been frozen, unable to think of how to react to that statement.

And then Stacey had pulled the gum out of her mouth and shoved it into El’s hair, the other girls doing the same so quickly she barely had time to react. They’d laughed and stalked off, leaving her frozen in disbelief, her hand reaching up shakily to tug at the wet, sticky lumps that covered her head.

She had screamed, the lights flickering as every single window in the library exploded outward, later blamed on a freak power surge and

the stormy, May weather.

Mike now watched as she sat at Byers' table, Joyce fluttering around her and holding a jar of peanut butter and a spoon, trying to get the pieces of gum out.

"My mom had to get gum out of my hair a few times," she'd sighed, looking at El's tearstained face and Hopper's worried one when they'd showed up at the door. "I'll see what I can do."

So far she'd removed most of the ones that had been at the crown of her head, the pieces there less tangled into the soft strands, coming off in slimy lumps. Mike hadn't left El's side, skipping his last period and not letting Hop argue as he climbed into the Blazer next to her, keeping his hand firmly wrapped around hers.

It was there now, holding tightly as she occasionally hiccuped, her eyes fixated on his like they was the only thing keeping her from being hysterical about the whole situation. And honestly, they kind of were.

"Kid, if you give me names, I can do something about this," Hop sighed. "This isn't okay. These girls should be punished."

"No," she muttered.

"Jane, I'm serious. If you won't tell me—"

"No."

She turned to look at him, tears dripping off of her clenched jaw, the stubbornness back in her eyes. Mike could tell it wasn't a battle she wanted fought by her dad. If those girls were going to pay, it was going to be how *she* wanted. Bullies always got away with it in the end, and since there were no witnesses she knew they wouldn't get in trouble. Her dad was a cop, she knew how the justice system was *supposed* to work—and how it actually worked instead.

"Jim," Joyce was working on the last piece, the one that was lower,

under her right ear. “Leave it alone for now. I’m...” she looked nervous. “I’m not sure if this last one is going to come out.”

The greasy peanut butter had worked so far, but the last piece gum was stuck firmly and Joyce’s eyes met Hop’s, wincing as they both realized what that meant. Mike realized too but didn’t let it show on his face, trying to keep calm for her.

“El, honey,” Joyce was like the boys, sticking to the old name instead of “Jane”, “I... this one isn’t budging. I’m going to have to... to cut it out.”

“No, no...”

The tears were back with a vengeance and Mike felt his heart squeeze in empathy as she looked up, between the two adults, face utterly distraught as her other hand touched the ends of her brown waves.

“No, *please*. I don’t want it cut.” A tear fell onto the table. “It’s... it makes me *pretty*.”

Hopper opened his mouth to give some fatherly advice but Mike beat him to it, his other hand joining the one holding hers, squeezing it so she looked at him.

“El, don’t say that. Your hair is pretty... but it’s not what makes *you* pretty,” he blushed, knowing the two adults were right there hearing what he was saying. “You’re what makes you pretty, how you laugh and smile and stuff, um...” he squirmed.

“You *like* my hair,” she said, voice accusatory.

“Well, yeah, but I like the rest of you too. I like... everything about you. Your hair is, um, part of that...”

“Everything?” Hop snorted condescendingly, some warning edge to his voice.

“Jim, let them be,” Joyce warned.

There was a silent battle between the two of them and then Hop looked away, knowing she was right and clearing his throat. El needed to hear it, even if it did make him feel weird, and he nodded at Mike to continue. But Mike wasn't looking at the older man, eyes still fixed on his distraught girlfriend.

"Pretty isn't just hair and clothes and stuff, it's... it's how you make people feel too. And you make me really happy and that's... pretty," he winced. "I know it doesn't make sense but it's one of those things I tell you about where you have to trust me."

"I'm still pretty if I cut my hair?"

"Yes. Really pretty," he squeezed her hand again. "I promise."

That word sealed it and she sighed, reaching up to touch her hair again. He usually said the right thing and this time was no different, his explanation and reassurance giving her the strength to nod at Joyce, who was already holding up the scissors.

"It'll grow back, like it did before," he assured her, eyes locked. "And I liked it back then. I'll still like it now."

Snip. Snip snip. Snip.

The honey-brown locks fell to the floor and she sobbed as she stared into the dark amber depths of Mike's eyes, holding onto his hands like he was a lifeline, his gaze never wavering. Hopper was watching, his paternal instinct still urging him to find however had done this to her and make them pay for it. He knew there was chance she'd get teased—her friends weren't exactly who he would have hung out with in high school either—but this was worse than he'd imagined.

Joyce worked quickly, making an even cut just above the gum and then trimming the rest of the hair to match, giving her a slightly choppy look, face pinched in concentration. El cried the entire time, never once breaking eye contact with Mike.

When it was over Joyce stood back and sighed, combing the strands

with her fingers to try and give it more oomph.

“If you hate it you can always see an actual hairdresser,” she told El. “But I’ve been cutting my hair for years so I think I didn’t do too bad.”

El stood slowly, reaching up to touch the much shorter locks, feeling just how many inches she’d lost . She shuddered, closing her eyes and then turned, almost running for the bathroom, where there was a mirror. Mike ran after her, knowing better than to leave her alone when she was still emotional. He caught her staring at her reflection, eyes huge.

“Mike,” she whimpered.

He moved behind her, staring at her reflection over her shoulder, reading the uncertainty in her eyes as she stared back at him. It took him back to that moment, when she’d been standing in his hallway in a blonde wig and pink dress, amazed at what she saw. He supposed it was the first time she’d felt pretty, a smile quirking her lips.

Now she just looked unsure, her hands tugging at her hair.

“I’m... it’s so short,” she whispered.

“It’s good. Or... it’s not bad. I promise, El.”

Back then he’d felt amazed and shocked and weirdly excited, his heart thumping in his chest as he’d silently agreed with how she felt about herself. Pretty.

This time he didn’t have to keep his distance, coming up close and wrapping his arms around her waist, holding her tightly and kissing the side of her head. She was still pretty of course, just in a different way. It seemed like every time she changed, she became even more attractive and he couldn’t imagine ever getting tired of her.

“Still pretty?”

Her voice was quiet, the uncertainty in her eyes fading as he met her reflection’s stare in the mirror again. He was still happy, still hugging

her and kissing her and making her feel like she could handle the sudden change. Maybe it wasn't so bad afterall.

He smiled, his arms squeezing tighter, knowing the answer he would always give her. The answer that would never change, no matter how short her hair was or how much makeup she wore or how many wrinkles would eventually line her face.

“Really pretty,” he nodded. “I still like your hair, El.”

A crooked smile teased her mouth and she turned away from her reflection to face him, wrapping her arms around his neck. Her lips brushed his cheek and he sighed happily, knowing she believed him. She hugged him to her and he let his head rest in the cozy crook of her neck, the shorter waves tickling his face as she whispered into his ear.

“I like you.”

Author's Note:

i realized the 9th was my one year anniversary of posting stories here! i actually didn't finish watching stranger things until mid-october but i started writing mileven fanfics a few weeks afterwards. fun fact: before these stories i only really wrote for my classes. stranger things really gave him the courage to write for myself and i'm so grateful for it.

i won't beg for comments but i will say that literally someone mentioned mike braiding el's hair had me shoot this right out so idk suggestions are always cool. i like knowing what you guys want.

love you all <3

-g